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Edited by: O. Namasasu
Department of Curriculum Studies
University of Zimbabwe
P.O. Box MP 167
MOUNT PLEASANT
Harare
Zimbabwe

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MEETING THE CHALLENGE: GEOGRAPHY AND GEOGRAPHERS

IN NATIONAL AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

by

E. Shamilupa Kalapula
University of Zambia

INTRODUCTION

While geography and geographers in the United Kingdom and the United States are fighting a vigorous and spirited battle to check University government funding cut-backs, geography in the southern African region is becoming a "growth industry" of sorts. The community of geographers is growing, academic programmes are expanding and student enrolment figures are on the rise.

This article is written to caution that while we pat each other on our backs and bask pleasantly with these favourable developments, experience from elsewhere indicates, nevertheless, that we have to guard our achievements with care. An unprecedented backlash can become a possibility. Suggestions presented here are, therefore, intended, not only to forestall or even delay this prospect, but also to enhance the role of geography and geographers especially in national development efforts. A strong regional grouping is suggested as well, if only to facilitate the flow and exchange of geographical research experiences and ideas. In a word, an admixture of a cautionary yet purposeful role with a prime tenor on relevance.

Reading through James' (1972) *All Possible Worlds: A History of Geographical Ideas* and Freeman's (1961) *A Hundred Years of Geography*, students of geography will feel their discipline has come of age. This assertion holds only when chronology and not event is under consideration. Indeed, since the Second World War, and particularly since the late 1960s, geography has undergone dramatic changes as Johnston (1979) has ably demonstrated, resulting in reformulated paradigms. But the pressure is still on, particularly from outside the discipline. There are questions of relevance for example. With real and potential threats of cut-backs, geography, for some unearthly reasons, becomes targetted as the sacrificial lamb. Two examples follow.

In the United Kingdom, the former Secretary of State for Education Sir Keith Joseph (1985) informed geographers that if geography felt it ought to be part of the national core curriculum, it should demonstrate why this should be so. For his part Brunson (1987, p. 206), while stressing the importance of field trips, argued that it provides knowledge and techniques required for the wise use of resources, the management of the environment, education of our youth toward a tolerant view of the needs of others, and a knowledge of how other people in the world live. It contributes towards the growth of useful personal qualities in the participants, so that they may

achieve all that they are capable of becoming. Certain that he had made his point, he asked rhetorically: "Does the Secretary of State really need more justification than that?"

In the United States, the National Geographic Society (1986) has re-ordered geographic education around five themes namely; (i) place, (ii) location, (iii) movement, (iv) regions and (v) human-environmental interaction. Together with the Association of American Geographers, the National Council for Geographic Education and the American Geographical Society, a joint effort has been launched through the Geographic Education National Implementation Project to popularize geography.

No such pressures have yet been exerted on the discipline of geography in southern Africa. Consequently, there has been no reason to meet such a challenge. Although geography, as an academic discipline was established relatively late in the region (outside South Africa) Williams (1987 p. 12) has recently noted that today, the subject is well-grounded in the six countries (namely Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe) and that training of local staff to take over from non-nationals is a major objective in the universities concerned. On balance, therefore, one could conclude that geography is alive and well in southern Africa. The practitioners are optimistic of the future of their discipline. But this should not be cause for complacency. At the risk of appearing to be a spokesman for the growing number of practising geographers in the region (and this is not the intention given the wide diversity that exists in many aspects within these countries) there are, nevertheless, rather common areas of concern where geographical knowledge could be used co-operatively for the common benefit of the people in the region. Polemically we take a part of geography here in order to understand the whole of it. It is to be understood that the advantage of the part is best served by promoting the advantage of the whole. Geography (the whole) is the study of place, or space, in the same sense that history is the study of time. Thus, the geographer's method of inquiry concentrates on asking two essential questions: "Where are the things located?", but even more important is the geographer's concern with "Why are they located where they are?" The answer to the former is largely descriptive, while the answer to the latter is entirely analytical. Therefore the modern geographer is concerned primarily with interpreting and explaining the occurrence, distribution, and inter-relationships of the physical and cultural patterns which can be discerned (Association of American Geographers, 1973).

At the tertiary level, and only in a strictly applied sense, therefore, I concur with Darkoh (1986 p. 21) when he makes the following points to argue for the relevance and role of geography and geographers, that:

1. As a resource assessor, the geographer has at least two important attributes: (i) his spatial research tradition, and (ii) his specially developed techniques of land use survey and analysis.
2. Geographical research can make data available which can help in compiling a developing country's inventory and in

planning its human resource development.

3. Geographical research can make data available which can identify the economic and social needs of a developing country.
4. There are a host of problems accompanying rapid urbanization and changing patterns of settlements - rural as well as urban - in developing countries towards the solution of which geographers can make useful contributions through research.

The rural areas, perhaps, deserve special consideration for they pose a particularly difficult challenge. As Mabogunje (1975 p. 300) has noted, the extent to which we meet this challenge may determine the extent of our contribution to our discipline. The food problem, for example, occupies a special place in our countries' plans and strategies for development. The problem is a comprehensive one, being a consequence of a wide combination of often inter-related factors - socio-economic, historical, ecological and demographic. Agricultural reforms and plans are thus called upon to meet two major inter-related challenges: first, to achieve a radical rise in the level of the productive forces in the agrarian sector of the national economy, in agricultural production, particularly its marketable part, and the peasants' living standards; and second, to re-structure production relations and social patterns in the rural economy in order to do away with pre-capitalist and, in some countries, capitalist modes of production.

The development plans of many African countries assign priority to agriculture as the sector underlying their general economic advancement. The ECA's concept of "rural development", which views agricultural development as the major guideline of the region, is a comprehensive strategy for the 1980s. It envisages integrated programmes for the development of agriculture and its infra-structure, and further extension of economic co-operation between African countries which is consistent with the "collective self-reliance" doctrine. Self-sufficiency in agricultural produce, based on the use of the countries' own resources is the backbone of the strategy, its major goal.

At the same time, the specific choice of development course and of priorities lies with each country and is dependent on its socio-economic background, the available resources, and local factors. As part of the general rural development strategy, these specifics serve as a supplementary basis for regional inter-government cooperation.

Geography and geographers face the challenge of re-formulating and re-conceptualizing the overriding problems of the rural sector. Re-thinking rural development will rebound significantly on the subject as a whole. These, however, are basically planning issues where our role and potential is likely to grow and expand even further.

GEOGRAPHIC RESEARCH AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Concerned, particularly with problems of development in the Third World, geographers have addressed themselves to this issue (see for example, Logan, 1972; Mabogunje, 1975 and Ettema, 1979). While thrusts and emphases differ owing to differences in training, practice and experience among the various authors, many agree, nonetheless, that geography can play a role in national development. Citing developmental problems of urbanization, population growth and distribution, famine and food supply, transportation, housing, resource use and misuse and the quality of man's physical and social environment, Darkoh (1985 p. 20) clearly sees a definite role that geography can play in national development in developing countries. Since a developing country's physical and human resources can best be utilised through a series of developing plans, geographers can lend a hand by (i) carrying out surveys in which the present condition is recorded (ii) analyse the data in order to identify patterns and existing trends and (iii) help plan for the future.

Geographic research can be geared directly to national goals and solutions to national development problems. One of the most organized centres in this respect is the Institute of Resource Assessment (IRA), formerly the Bureau of Resource Assessment and Land Use Planning (BRALUP) that developed out of the Department of Geography at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania as an applied research organization in the fields of resource analysis, including population resources, landuse, and regional planning in support of the current and long-term plans of the United Republic of Tanzania as well as other fields in the University (Berry and Kates, 1973; Mabogunje, 1975; and Darkoh, 1986).

The Department of Rural and Urban Planning at the University of Zimbabwe is expected to play the same role. In Zambia, while geographers have been called upon to serve on government programmes such as the National Commission for Development Planning's baseline project and the powerful regional development committee that has outlined objectives for the next national development plan, more, although purely academic work, has in fact been in river basin development. Other geographers, in the region, are playing equally important, although also varied roles. This is a most welcome development which should be encouraged, strengthened and supported.

SHARING IDEAS AND EXPERIENCES

Williams (1987 p. 14) has estimated that we have a community of rather more than 50 academic geographers based in six different universities in the region. Some have formed geographical societies whose major function seems to have been the publication of journals intended primarily to advance understanding of the geography of their respective countries. This, again, is a most welcome development. Even more pleasing, perhaps, is the new campaign by some editors to give their journals an international dimension. This means accepting publishable manuscripts that do not necessarily cover the country in which the journal is published or based.

In 1982 a regional conference of the Commonwealth Geographical Bureau held in Lusaka was intended to bring together geographers in the region. Some of the papers delivered at this conference have since been published under the title *Geographical Perspectives on Development in Southern Africa* (Williams G.P. and A.P. Wood (eds) (1987)). This is perhaps the first ever such endeavour in an attempt to share ideas and experiences at a regional level. The momentum and ideals should not be left to lapse and die a natural death. In the absence of a pan-African geographical journal, a regional one could be started, perhaps within the framework of the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC). Given such a structure, our role in important programmes like UNEP's environmental management of the common Zambezi river system should have been more evident and our discipline and its applied nature more enhanced.

The community of geographers in the region is growing each year with the necessary quality and quantity to support a steady and respectable regional publication. With high publishing costs everywhere in the region, a joint regional effort is, eminently, a sound proposition.

Further, there are formal and informal links between departments in the region. Some exchange publications, others carry out joint field courses, yet others co-operate in research and publications. The structure is there.

CONCLUSION

The discipline of geography faces the challenge of re-formulating and re-conceptualizing the overriding problems especially of the rural environments and forging new analytical tools for evaluating alternative patterns of development (Mabogunje, 1975, p. 301). Research should aim for social relevance so that the potential contribution of geography both to the solution of practical development problem, and to the attainment of further theoretical insights can be more expeditiously achieved.

My limited aim here, has been to initiate a dialogue by focussing narrowly on possible challenges to geography and geographers and suggesting one area (our role in rural and national development planning) among many, where we could "win friends and influence others". I have called for a formation of a region-wide geographical body with firm objectives (preferably grounded within the ideals of SADCC) and for the establishment of a publishing outlet starting, perhaps, with a regular newsletter. Through it, ideas and experiences could be shared and exchanged. It could be the beginning of reducing crippling and negative dependence. To choose such a course is not to deny geography's past but merely to understand it. We do not have to come to a point of paralyzing conflict with possible attendant dying convulsions.

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